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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [ENRG](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: CHANGE COMING TO BELARUS WITH OR WITHOUT CIVIL  
SOCIETY INPUT

REF: A. MINSK 686

[1](#)B. MINSK 747

#### Introduction and Summary

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[1](#)1. (SBU) The fledgling Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) held its inaugural conference September 10-12 in Kyiv. The conference represents the first attempt to gather the full spectrum of independent political and social analysts of Belarus, without GOB or political participants, to discuss trends in the country. Participants agreed Belarus faces a period of serious changes due to increased international pressures. Most analysts felt Lukashenko's regime would undertake adjustments, while they failed to reach a consensus on the ability of the opposition to adapt accordingly. End introduction and summary.

#### External Pressure on Belarus Unrelenting Absent Concessions

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[1](#)2. (U) Participants predicted that the EU will rebuff overtures from Belarus for dialogue given current domestic repression. Dirk Schuebel, Charge of the EU Delegation in Ukraine, announced that the EU postponed a meeting of European and Belarusian energy experts previously scheduled for October. He also said that, contrary to GOB propaganda, efforts to open an EU office in Minsk had bogged down. However, the September 14 EU summit in Kyiv showed the GOB that close relations with Belarus were possible with democratization. Martin Butora, former Slovak Ambassador to the United States, hailed the launch of the Eurasian Democratic Foundation, a rough equivalent to the National Endowment for Democracy, to take place in Prague in October.

[1](#)3. (U) None of the participants on the panel on Belarus-Russian relations saw a chance for cardinal changes in relations in the short-term. Mises Center Director Yaroslav Romanchuk noted Russia's continued dependence on Belarus for energy transit in the short term would moderate the Kremlin's policy. He gave three scenarios: the status quo of occasional crises; Lukashenko's isolation; or concessions from Lukashenko after Russia accedes to the WTO. Kirill Koktysh, Scientific Director at Moscow State Institute of International Relations' Center for Economic Strategy and Education Programs, said there was consensus in the Russian government that Lukashenko should not have access to nuclear power.

#### Belarusian Economic Model Forced to Change

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¶4. (U) Koktysh predicted the gradual economic degradation of Belarus. Large factories would come up for sale to insiders. Rather than purchasing them in order to invest, initial buyers would seek to resell companies at a quick profit. If layoffs followed, the government would have some level of insulation from social backlash by blaming the initial inside investor, according to Koktysh. Pavel Daneyko, Chairman of the Supervisory Board of the Institute for Privatization and Management (IPM), added that Russia's increased wealth represented a further challenge for the Belarusian economy, which relies extensively on the export of manufactured goods to its neighbor to the east. Russian companies would increasingly purchase higher quality imports from other countries, according to Daneyko.

How will Government Respond?  
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¶5. (U) Most participants believed Lukashenko already had begun strategic change to maintain his rule despite the coming economic challenges. Aleskandr Chubrik of IPM presented data that Lukashenko abandoned his earlier populist policies, having raised salaries for government employees well above average wages and pensions. Valeriy Karbalevich of the Strategy think tank argued that the GOB's moves against parties with a leftist orientation (ref A) showed that Lukashenko feared criticism from his traditional base of supporters.

¶6. (U) Former Head of the Socio-political Information Department within Lukashenko's Presidential Administration Aleksandr Feduta explained the crackdown as preparation for the introduction of a pseudo-party system mirroring that created by the Kremlin in Russia. Feduta proposed the pro-government Communist party would form the official

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opposition in parliament, with the fledgling Belaya Rus becoming the party of power. He noted that the regime replaced old-timers in the pro-Lukashenko Communist party with younger, more competent loyalists.

Political Opposition's Adaptability in Doubt  
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¶7. (U) Many analysts discounted the strength of opposition parties and some disagreed with their plans for next year's parliamentary elections. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalist Yuriy Drakokhurst argued that the weakness of the democratic opposition reflected overall social conditions. Analyst Dmitriy Babitskiy said that the opposition was mistaken to seek to campaign in parliamentary elections, which would waste time and demoralize activists, he said. "For Freedom" movement Deputy Head Yuriy Gubarevich called for the elections to serve as a platform to position the UDF's 2006 candidate, Aleksandr Milinkevich, for another run in 2011 presidential elections.

¶8. (U) Not all expressed pessimism about political parties, however. Andrey Dynko, editor of the independent paper "Nasha Niva," said simply sticking to the opposition's parliamentary campaign strategy would show discipline. Feduta also said participating in elections ensured the opposition would work actively and the campaign process could inject badly needed new blood into the parties.

Social Support Base for Lukashenko Changing  
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¶9. (U) Russian pollster Igor Zadorin said data show that public support for Lukashenko now rests mainly on pragmatic calculations, whereas up until 2001 most Belarusians backed Lukashenko due to charismatic populist appeals and anti-corruption campaigns. Zhanna Litvina of the Belarusian Association of Journalists said the internet posed a threat

to Lukashenko's propaganda machine, which successfully bolsters the President's image currently.

¶10. (U) Analyzing Belarusian youth after the March 2006 tent camp, youth publication "CDMag" editor Irina Vidanova said most youth returned to passivity due to the failure of new organizations and disillusionment with old leaders. Nonetheless, she found several bright spots. Many more youths became motivated by values rather than money. Some joined existing groups. In the case of Malady Front (ref B), youths demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice for their beliefs. Even passive youths became more skeptical of government ideology.

Comment: As Usual, Lukashenko Ahead of His Opponents  
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¶11. (SBU) If analysts failed to agree on a single new vision for Belarus, they did reach a consensus that changes will occur due in part to new economic realities brought about by higher energy prices. The regime will try to adjust to maintain its popular support or rule without broad-based backing. The opposition must also rise to the challenge if it hopes to participate in shaping Belarus' future. By helping consolidate independent expert opinion, BISS at least made the opposition aware of the difficult task it faces.

¶12. (SBU) In his final remarks, Ambassador Butora asked civil society leaders in Belarus to avoid dwelling on the many reasons they could not do certain things. Butora suggested concentrating on improved communication, cooperation and consolidation: important means to a democratic transition.

¶13. (U) Post coordinated with Embassy Kyiv on this cable. Further information on the conference will become available on [www.belinstitute.eu](http://www.belinstitute.eu).  
Stewart